

Giving fear a woman's face

ST 24 MAY 1998



Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

Paula Rego says she has 'a female story' to tell in her paintings — but what happened to her to make it such a puzzling and uncomfortable tale?

PAULA REGO harbours an extraordinary ambition. She wants her pictures to look as if they have been painted by anyone other than herself. "I hate it when people recognise my work. If only I could do something that didn't look as if it had been done by me."

Yet the more she tries to paint herself out of her pictures, the more firmly entrenched she becomes. "There's always something in there that is, of course, you. Somehow it has your stamp, your handwriting."

We are sitting in her large Camden studio in north London, surrounded by the pictures she has prepared for her six-week exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, which opens on June 17. Sadly for her, the paintings — costume dramas based loosely on Portuguese literature — could not have been painted by anyone except her. There is that same strange energy which characterises all her work — each picture is a puzzle, managing to be both surreal and yet a study in human emotion. It is useless to rely on Rego herself for any interpretation. "I forget what I mean by them, so I make up lies." She guffaws loudly.

If anything unites the pictures, it is the feeling of discomfort they inspire. In *The Cell*, a man — an unusual subject for Rego, who concentrates on women — is hunched on his bed, his limbs contorted and his face a picture of misery. A statuette of the Virgin Mary lies under his bed. In another, *The Coop*, a dead chicken hangs in the air and two dark-haired stocky women look dreamily out, one of them with a voodoo doll in her lap. "A little witchcraft here and there doesn't go amiss," says Rego, by way of explanation, adding a supporting anecdote.

In the past 15 years Paula Rego has become one of this country's best-known figurative artists. Born in Portugal, she came to England at the age of 16 to train at the Slade School of Fine Art. It took another 27 years before her first solo show here in 1981. Since then her success has spiralled and in 1990 she became the first artist in residence at the National Gallery, where she painted the spectacular mural *Crivelli's Garden* in the restaurant of the Sainsbury Wing. Her biographer John McEwen described her then as "the most talked about artist in the country"; in the past few years her pictures have shot up more than 10 times in value — major paintings now cost over £50,000.

"It's marvellous to have money after all those years," she says, in a voice which is soft and still stamped by her Portuguese upbringing. "I was always ambitious and I

wanted recognition, but I didn't think I deserved it."

As we talk, the painting that will become the signature piece of her next exhibition, *The Avengeful Angel*, sits on an easel watching over us. Dressed in a golden skirt and black bodice, the angel brandishes a sword in one hand and a sponge in the other. It is bizarre and arresting, an image that stays in your mind long after you have left the studio.

Paula Rego herself is not a woman you could easily forget. She is extraordinary and unfathomable, with an intensity that makes her quite disconcerting — she has a way of appraising you, looking you up and down both literally and figuratively, that makes you feel distinctly uncomfortable. But she is also very disarming, dissolving into wonderful, childlike giggles at frequent intervals.

She maintains that all her flamboyance is confined to her canvases. "I am not adventurous at all. The only adventures I have are in here [she waves a hand in the direction of her paintings]. I'm too frightened to be adventurous in real life; it's not a good idea anyway because you can get into dreadful trouble. You can get into trouble in pictures as well but that's different because you can always say 'It's only a picture.'"

So she tries to live as "normal" a life as possible, turning into her studio on the Number 24 bus from her home in Hampstead every day. "If you live quietly, with a routine, you can put your energy and your imagination into your pictures... You waste a lot of energy being unconventional or behaving outrageously."

Rego laughs again, revealing a crooked array of teeth. At 63, she is a striking woman with a black helmet of hair, heavy make-up and a shirt which is a palette of turquoise, green and black, unbuttoned to expose an inch of cleavage. Her small hands are unusually expressive, almost like those of a flamenco dancer as she gesticulates dramatically to express a point. When she feels moved, she has a habit of grasping the arm of the chair until the whites of her knuckles show. Describing how she struggles to cope without her late husband's advice and support, she says through clenched teeth: "I miss it tremendously. I miss it appallingly."

Her husband, Vic Willing, a successful artist in his own right, died 10 years ago from multiple sclerosis. They met at the Slade and although he was already married, Rego — who was just a teenager at the time — fell instantly in love with him. A tough honesty forbids her from romanticising the beginning of their relationship. "It wasn't inev-



Avoiding trouble 'The only adventures I have are in here. I'm too frightened to be adventurous in real life' — Paula Rego preparing for her new exhibition

'We were brought up to think of man as somehow dangerous. You never looked closely at men — you averted your eye until they grabbed for your arse'

itable. I worked very hard at it. I wanted him."

She returned to Portugal pregnant. One of her most famous paintings, *Pregnant Rabbit* telling her Parents, depicts a humanoid rabbit telling a cat-mother and dog-father about her situation. "That's autobiographical. Why is she a rabbit? "Because rabbits get pregnant all the time, don't they?" She laughs uproariously.

In fact, her parents took the news in their stride and wholeheartedly supported her. Vic followed her out to her. They married in 1959 and had two more children. The diagnosis of his disease in 1968, following abruptly on the heels of her beloved father's death, had a very negative impact on Rego's work. "From the late 1960s until 1979 I did a lot of bad rubbish; my pictures became very academic, it all coincided with sterility in my life."

Yet even in his illness Victor continued to encourage her and she says she can still hear his voice. "Every day I hear him. He is like one of the animals in my paintings, a company and support to give me courage. But it is very difficult now. I have to decide and I can't rely on anybody. I try to do what I want; that's the only thing I have to go by."

Those close to her say she has changed since her husband's death. Lila Nunes, a close friend who helped to nurse her husband and now

works as her principal model, says that Rego is more self-assured. "She has gained a lot of confidence and trusts herself more now than she does 'have that support.'"

Yet throughout her life Rego has been subject to periods of deep depression. "I am a manic depressive. I have this cycle — the black dog comes to me and I feel like death. I can hold it at bay if I am working tremendously hard, but if I finish a series of pictures, then it engulfs me."

Jungian analysis helps her pull through at such times. "It gives you the strength you need and you're less afraid of being you."

A clue to Rego's fears and demons lies in her upbringing. Portugal in the Thirties and Forties was an unhappy place, stifled under a military dictatorship and a repressive Roman Catholic Church. What had the strongest impact on Rego was the suppression of women, a memory that still makes her tingle with rage. "They were Victorian values. We were brought up to think of man as being somehow dangerous. You never looked closely at men — you averted your eye until they grabbed for your arse."

Paula, an only child, was born in Lisbon to a well-to-do family; her father was an engineer and her beautiful mother had trained as a painter. As a toddler, she was left with her grandparents and an elderly aunt while her

parents moved to England where her father completed his training.

For the next year and a half, she alternated weeks between the grandparents, who doted on her, and the aunt, whom she remembers as austere and depressive. Paula became very shy and withdrawn and for many years found it hard to mix with other children. "I was afraid of them. The playground was a terrifying place; there was a child who wanted to take my eyes out with scissors. I didn't like meeting people..."

She still finds social situations difficult and hates dinner parties. "You have to talk

with people. I don't mind the small talk — that's quite a relief, really. But it's when people start discussing things." She twists her hands in frustration.

Does she prefer to communicate through painting? "You don't have to communicate at all, you know." She repeats this a couple of times, sinking into a sort of reverie.

But she does communicate through her work. Above all, she is celebrating the Portuguese women who peopled her childhood: solid, stoic figures, strong and capable yet effectively mute. "I have a story to tell which is a female story. I do believe there is such a thing."

The few men scattered through Rego's work are usually tiny figures, frivolous and useless. And yet Rego has always been surrounded by men whom she has admired and adored: her grandfather, her father, her husband and her son. So why does she not revere such men in her painting?

"I do," she says. "They're in the women. I mean the good men are what make the women so terrific."

She admits that she can be excruciatingly embarrassed by her work. "You have to risk making a complete ass of yourself. You have to face whatever it is you are afraid of, but it gives me a sense of unease having all that showing."

Yet when she is involved in the painting, she forgets herself and lets the picture itself dictate the action: "You have actually to give the picture its head. It begins to have its own life and you are dying to see what happens at the end."

At such times the most bizarre objects provide her with inspiration. When she was finishing *In the Wilderness*, a picture of a woman cast out and clasping her hands in supplication, she realised that she needed something extra. Her eyes fell on a pink sponge pig among the myriad of strange objects she collects on her desk. "It was just the right thing. Everything eventually has its place. Even this lava lamp," she says, picking up a miniature lavatory that she bought at a sample show in Portugal.

ALTHOUGH she is immensely sensitive to artistic criticism of her work, Rego does not mind controversy. Last year Mary Whitehouse called for the closure of one of her shows due to the "bestiality" of the subject matter. "Mary Whitehouse does not count," says Rego dismissively. And at one of her early exhibitions in Portugal, a woman angrily said to her: "You must be a slut to paint these pictures."

"It makes you feel joyful to hear things like that," she says today. "It was one of my early collages. There were a lot of sexual organs and bits all cut up and floating around with wings. She thought it was obscene, which of course it was. It's what I wanted."

She has often said that she paints "to give fear a face". Stories, for Rego, are the only way of imposing order on the chaos that threatens to engulf her. "Stories are a way of making sense of things. I want people to look at my pictures and to be absolutely gripped by a sense of expectation about what is going to happen next."

The paradox is, of course, that unlike a story written with words, there is no next page. You never do find out what happens next. The painting, like the artist herself, remains an enigma.

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